THE INDIAN TRADERS

By Frank McNitt

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First edition.

This book moves far from the field
of his professional work as an archaeologist,
but in direction may approach
his unusually deep feeling for the Southwest.
In respect and friendship, therefore,
what follows is dedicated to

R. GORDON VIVIAN

HP5405

14

Thomas Keam: 1884-1904

THOMAS KEAM was twenty-nine years old when he settled in the canyon with his brother William and began trading with the Hopis and Navahos. For him the year 1875 was mid-point in his life; the canyon would be his home for twenty-seven years more.

When Keam first saw the canyon that now bears his name is uncertain. Possibly in the 1860's, while serving with the First New Mexico Volunteer Cavalry, he passed that way.

His reasons for locating his trading post there are more easily determined. The canyon was sheltered and provided wood and pure water. More important, it lay astride a main trade route and formed the recognized boundary between the Navahos and the Hopis, whose three villages on First Mesa were only twelve miles to the west. By settling here, he was at once in the center of more than two thousand Indians of two tribes. The nearest white trader then was many miles to the east, on Pueblo Colorado Wash. This was a good place for a young trader who already spoke Navaho, would soon learn the Hopi language, and knew how to get along with Indians. Trading, however, may not have been uppermost in his mind when he went to the canyon.

"My main object in taking up a land claim here was to establish a Cattle Ranche," Keam wrote in 1886. Because the canyon was not then a part of any reservation he was able to file on 640 acres.[1] He

1 Letter from Keam to Commissioner J. D. C. Atkins, February 11, 1886. (National Archives, Record Group 75, Letters Received, #5426, 1886.) His desert land claim remains something of a mystery since it could not be found on file at Pres-

intended to increase his holdings but was prevented from doing so when the Hopi reservation, created by executive order of President Chester A. Arthur, enclosed his "Ranche" in December, 1882.

A temporary Hopi agency was located at Trout Spring, fifteen miles northeast of Walpi, in 1874, but was abandoned the following year; Hopi affairs were handled thereafter from Defiance Agency until 1882 when Keam provided one of his canyon buildings for the use of Agent J. H. Fleming. A greenhorn sadly out of his element, Fleming was oppressed by his surroundings.

The agency, he said, "is in what is known as 'Kearn's cañon, famous for its springs. . . . With the high winds and rugged walls of the cañon on either side, one is reminded of some medieval prison-house. We are not trammeled by over civilization and the restraints of fashion. Our nearest post-office, except one at a Mormon settlement"—meaning Moenkopi—"is Fort Wingate, 120 miles distant. The surrounding country is an elevated plain, interspersed with barren mountains in the South and furrowed here and there with deep cañons."[2]

Fleming was even more depressed by the Hopis, whose customs Keam's protégé, Alexander Stephen, was then studying. He had not yet attended one of the Hopi dances, Fleming shuddered, but "The great evils in the way of their ultimate civilization lie in these dances. The dark superstitions and unhallowed rites of a heathenism as gross as that of India or Central Africa still infects them with its insidious poison."

The Navahos had a name for this place—Black Reeds Pointing Out, a reference perhaps to the reeds growing about the springs and lining the clear stream that then flowed level with the canyon floor westward into Polacca Wash. When Kit Carson camped in the canyon in 1863 his troops knew the site as Peach Orchard Spring, and it was only after Thomas Keam had been there a few years that traders and the military casually called it Keams Canyon.

cott, then the county seat. Establishment of the Hopi reservation in 1882 placed Keams Canyon in the southeast corner of a tract then comprising 2,920 square miles. The Navaho reservation, meanwhile, was enlarged with additions on the west (October 29, 1878) and east, south, and west (January 6, 1880). In 1883, before it was enlarged again the following year with additions to the north and west, the Navaho reservation contained 8,544 square miles. Navaho additions of 1878 and 1880 gave the tribe substantially more land than proposed by Arny in 1875, without requiring the surrender of the San Juan region. Boundary descriptions of these additions will be found in *Annual Report, C. I. A., 1878, 1880, 1883, 1884.*

2 *Annual Report, C. I. A., 1882.*

HP5406

If the canyon reminded Fleming of a medieval prison, it would impress others as a pleasant oasis lying between high wooded plateau and the desert approach to the Hopi mesas. Curving east to west a distance of eight miles, the canyon's sandstone walls, varying in height from 150 to 350 feet, break off into huge boulders and talus. As it is relatively shallow, so the canyon is moderately narrow, averaging about 100 yards in width.

For the site of his trading post, Keam chose the sunnier north side of the stream, some two miles below the eastern head of the canyon. We have no description of this original post—one of the first in Navaho country away from Defiance Agency—but no doubt it provided living quarters for himself and his brother, and presumably for their Navaho wives. It was small, most likely, built of stone which lay abundantly at hand, and probably close by was a wooden stockade or corral.

Except for the next few years when he also maintained trading posts at or near Defiance Agency, Keam concentrated all his efforts on his canyon store. From the very beginning he prospered: wool and hides and Navaho blankets were brought to him from a radius of nearly one hundred miles. His pawn room glittered with a treasure of Navaho silver and turquoise. From the Hopis, by trade or purchase, came loom-work of the men weavers: sashes, kilts, and occasionally blankets. Shelves of his storerooms were loaded with Hopi pottery, baskets and woven plaques, a few rare *tabletas* used in Hopi ceremonies, and bright-hued kachina dolls. Havasupai and Apache baskets mingled with the rest, and from the ceiling beams hung Navaho saddles (high-forked fore and aft, the leather nail-studded), bridles and quirts, and rawhide lariats.

During his first six years in the canyon Keam depended for his supplies upon the Santa Fe contractors and government freighters, sending his wagons to meet theirs at Fort Wingate or, if he were lucky, at Defiance Agency. A trip one way in good weather might take five days, a month if arroyos were flooded or snow covered the land. In this high country winters were severe.

The summer of 1882 brought a crucial change: tracks of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad advanced west from Gallup and then west from the Painted Desert towards the San Francisco Peaks and a raw new lumber town that would be named Flagstaff. In the wake of the road gangs the towns of Holbrook and Winslow sprang up, at once serving as supply centers for the entire territory, north and south. Now Keam's wagons cut a trail almost due south to Holbrook,

only seventy miles away, taking two and one-half days for a journey that before required four or five. There was less chance of breakage or loss, and shelves that might be partly empty for weeks were now tightly stocked.

As his trade with the Indians prospered, Keam found it necessary to spread out, expand, and build more buildings. Soon after Lieutenant Bourke visited the canyon in 1881, Keam engaged in a building program that occupied him for the next six years. Besides his own home of four rooms, each fifteen feet square, there were his trading post, warerooms, blacksmith and carpenter shops, stables and wagon sheds, and several small buildings for friends, employees, and random tenants—all together a *hacienda* of perhaps twelve or fifteen structures. All were grouped close to his original site chosen in 1875, north of the stream and shaded now by a long row of cottonwoods.

A letter written by Keam in 1886 gives a fair picture of how his buildings appeared:

"They are all built of dressed stone, laid in adobe mortar, the walls averaging two feet in thickness. The roofs are constructed with ridge poles, joists and rafters of pine timbers, covered with boards, and overlaid with clay—an improved modification of the Mexican earth roof—essential to living in comfort in one story dwellings in this region.[3]

"For protection of the walls, all the roofs project over them about a foot and a half, and are surrounded with wide eave-boards in which numerous spouts are inserted to carry off the rain water. The rooms are all substantially floored with pine boards"—at a time when many dwellings had floors of pounded earth—"except the carpenter and black-smith shops . . . and the ceilings are from eight to eight and a half feet high. The interior walls are smoothly plastered and whitewashed. There is a large deposit of gypsiferous clay exposed on the mesa at a short distance from this place, which makes an admirable whitewash. This I have utilized, and at little cost keep all my buildings with white, glossy coats, both inside and out."

His own house, Keam said, "is also built of dressed stone with walls two feet thick; the roof, which is much higher than any of the other buildings is of shingles and the ceilings are ten feet high." Even under the hot sun of Arizona summer the house must have remained cool.

"The windows are large, the floors well laid with pine boards; the walls and ceilings are carefully finished and handsomely papered, and the floors carpeted. It is surrounded with a fine yard and paling,

[3] Letter from Keam to Atkins, cited above.

HP5407

and in the garden in front of the house is a fountain supplied with excellent spring water brought through iron pipes and forced up by a hydraulic ram."

When Bourke visited Keam's home in 1881, as we have seen, he found in the shelves of good books, the racks of test tubes and chemicals, and the array of blankets and pottery a warm reflection of the personalities and tastes of the occupants. We may believe the house was filled with fascinating objects Bourke merely hints at, because Keam and his friend Stephen were knowledgeable collectors. Perhaps before Stephen's arrival in 1880, and certainly after that, Keam explored every foot of neighboring Antelope Mesa and—long before pot-hunting became illegal—dug into the ruins of Awatovi and lesser abandoned sites of the Jeddito Valley. The "Moqui pottery" Bourke saw in Keam's home undoubtedly included choice specimens from these ruins.

While exploring the lower reaches of Jeddito Wash with Stephen and their Hopi friend Polaki, Keam found an opening, or hole, in the rocks descending to a great depth and large enough to permit only one man to pass at a time.

Polaki informed them that modern Hopis never approached the place except with reverence, first scattering sacred corn meal on the ground. Entering the cavity, which for the Hopis may have had a significance similar to their mythical emergence upon earth from a dark underworld, Keam found the rock abutments covered with ancient petroglyphs.

Near this place they found also a cave in the rocks which Polaki told them the Hopis and Navahos both feared so much they would not enter it or pass close to its mouth. Keam and Stephen, of course, immediately made a search—and found the cave utterly empty except for the debris and droppings of a colony of porcupines.[4]

Another incident reveals Keam as a collector, this time of rare objects he soon felt compelled to surrender. Writing of Hopi kachinas, Jesse Walter Fewkes observed: "The worship of the horned A-lo-sa-ka is more strictly characteristic of the pueblo of Mi-con-in-o-vi [Mishongnovi], where this fraternity is probably more numerous than at Walpi. The images of A-lo-sa-ka were once in the possession of Mr. Keam (T. V.) for a few days, but at the earnest solicitation of almost the whole population of Mi-con-in-o-vi they were returned to the priests. At that time they were carried from Keams Canyon back to

[4] This episode is related by Thomas Donaldson, quoted in Farish's *History of Arizona.*

the pueblo with a great ceremony, when a pathway of sacred meal was made for many miles along the trail over which they were borne."

The Alosaka, or Muy-ingova, is the Hopi Germ God or Two-Horned God, one of some thirty-six Hopi deities that are never, or almost never, impersonated in kachina dances or represented by images. Harold S. Colton notes that the Alosaka is one of the rare exceptions, in that he is impersonated at the time of the Wuwuchim ceremony in November.[5] Keam, perhaps with Stephen's aid, evidently found more than one carved figure of the revered Alosaka; and the priests of Mishongnovi, learning of this, begged him to restore them to the pueblo. If an altar boy should remove and sell some sacred church object to a foreign collector of antiquities, the situation would be similar.

Keam, unlike Lorenzo Hubbell and John B. Moore and a few other early traders, did not help the Navaho weavers of his region develop a pattern or style that might be identified with himself or his trading post. He did a large trade in blankets, however, and was well acquainted with problems and finer points of that craft.

A special-order blanket that he commissioned one of his weavers to make is an interesting example of the Navaho "pictorial rug"—a blanket which departs from the usual range of native design elements and instead is as faithfully representative of objects—such as a railroad train, a house, or a cow—as the weaver can make it. Moderately small, about three feet wide by four and one-half feet long, this blanket has a brown border and predominating inside colors of red, white, and blue. Symbols woven in the design are borrowed from the insignia of the Union Army: a United States flag with thirteen stars beneath an eagle, a five-pointed star, and the figures of two soldiers shaking hands. At the top, woven in orange yarn, are the letters "G. A. R."

Keam presented the blanket, soon before he left his canyon forever, to Lieutenant Joseph B. Loughran, with whom he had served in the First New Mexico Cavalry.

Washington Matthews once sought Keam's opinion while trying to determine when Navaho weavers first introduced the so-called two-

[5] "Alosaka, the god of reproduction . . . is thought of as gentle and kind and holds himself aloof. His home is in the underworld. . . . The headdress of the impersonator carries two horns that curve back. His hair hangs down his back. The only body paint . . . is a white line down the front of his arms and legs. For a costume he wears a white tanned buckskin. He wears moccasins and has turtle shell rattles tied on his legs. In his hands he carries deer horns and a wand." (Colton, *Hopi Kachina Dolls.*)

HP5408